

# Safety Belts

**Background.** Every 14 seconds someone in the U.S. is injured in a traffic crash...and every 12 minutes someone is killed. *Safety belts are the most important safety equipment in a motor vehicle and the most effective means of reducing injuries and fatalities in all kinds of crashes.* They are estimated to save 9,500 lives each year. Today, thanks to increased awareness about motor vehicle safety and state belt laws, 68 percent buckle up. But there is evidence that this group of regular belt users mostly are the “good” drivers who are *least* likely to be involved in a serious crash. Belt use among those actually involved in fatal crashes is very low—only in the 30-40 percent range. The true potential of safety belts to save lives and reduce the staggering \$150 billion a year that motor vehicle crashes cost the nation (including \$55 billion to American businesses) will not be realized until belt use reaches at least 85 percent—a national goal the President has set for the year 2000.

**What employers need to do to increase safety belt use.** Employers have a crucial role to play in increasing safety belt (and child safety seat) use. Specifically, employers should:

- Have a strong policy requiring employees to buckle up when driving on company business (and encourage them to do so on their personal time).
- Communicate to employees through organizational channels (newsletters, e-mail, etc.) the importance of safety belts.
- Support local and national partnerships seeking to promote safety belt education, legislation and law enforcement, and contribute resources (direct funding and/or in-kind services) to the effort.

**What key points should we tell our employees?**

- Safety belts work. The one or two seconds it takes to buckle up can mean the difference between life and death in a crash. Belts reduce the chance of injury or death in a crash by 45 percent. Think of it as the best “life insurance” you can have in force—and it’s free.
- Air bags provide only *supplemental* crash protection, and only in frontal crashes—they back up the safety belts to provide added protection. *Safety belts provide the primary protection in frontal, side, rear and rollover crashes.*

## Air Bags

**Background.** Air bags, inflatable cushions that deploy faster than the blink of an eye to provide *supplemental* protection for front seat occupants in frontal crashes, began phasing into the U.S. fleet in the late 1980's. Today, all new cars and virtually all light trucks offer both driver and passenger air bags as standard equipment. Air bags have a good overall safety record and are credited with saving more than 2,000 lives since being introduced, but they are not a safety panacea. They can have dangerous side effects, and more than 40 children and 30 adults have been killed in air bag deployments. Most of these tragedies could have been avoided by safety belt use.

**What employers need to know about air bags.** Companies/organizations that have air bag equipped vehicles in their fleet need to understand how air bags work and communicate to their employees about the simple precautions that can greatly reduce the risk of injury or death from an air bag...both on-the-job and during personal driving. Familiarization with the vehicle's air bag system should be a routine part of turning over the keys to a company car. It also is important to have a safety belt use policy for employees driving on official business (and encouraged strongly for personal time as well). *Belts must be used in combination with air bags.*

**What key points should we tell our employees?**

- **Air bags work.**
- **Use safety belts.** Air bags offer *supplemental* protection and only in frontal crashes. Your *primary* protection *in frontal and all other kinds of crashes is the safety belt.* It is the single most effective item of safety equipment in a motor vehicle.
- **"The Back Is Where It's At!"** Children 12 and under should ride in the back seat—it's the safest place to ride *with or without air bags.* If a child must ride in the front seat of a vehicle with a passenger-side air bag, move the seat back as far as possible and make sure the child is buckled up.
- **Infants should never be in the front seat.** An air bag is too powerful for an infant's fragile body. *Never place a rear-facing infant seat in the front seat of a vehicle with a passenger-side air bag.*
- **Put distance between you and the air bag.** Short drivers should move as far as possible away from the steering wheel to give the air bag room to deploy and dissipate its energy. A space of 10-12 inches between the chest and air bag module is recommended by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

# How to Conduct a Safety Belt Survey

Surveys should be appropriate to the size and circumstances of your company/organization. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to proceed. Nevertheless, the survey should be organized carefully, and a consistent method for collecting data should be used for every survey. The following components are recommended:

1. Give one person overall responsibility for the operation. Seek someone with good organizational skills and knowledge about basic statistical techniques.
2. Conduct a survey to establish a baseline number, so you can measure your progress and success.
3. After a baseline survey, set a usage goal (85%) and communicate it extensively throughout the organization for several weeks before doing another survey. Reiterate the company/organization belt use policy and why it is important.
4. Select locations for collecting data (for example, the entrances and exits to employee parking areas).
5. Decide exactly what data you will collect (Belt use by drivers? All occupants? Age? Gender? Vehicle type?).
6. Determine the best times to collect data and how many observations are needed for a credible survey. Collecting data on several dates will give a better “snapshot” of actual usage.
7. Develop a simple data collection form. Obtain clip boards, pens, signs, etc.
8. Notify local police that you will be collecting data, especially if the process could affect traffic in the area because drivers often slow down and “rubberneck” if they see something going on.
9. Recruit employees to serve as data collectors and instruct them on how to collect the data efficiently. Make sure their actions are passive and do not cause a traffic bottleneck that delays employee arrivals and departures.
10. Collect, tabulate and analyze data.
11. If you are unable to conduct observational surveys, you can distribute a written questionnaire. The results may not be as accurate, but the activity will allow you to measure progress.
12. Report results extensively. Give kudos...or remedial reminders...as appropriate.